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ABSTRACT

Contrary to expectations a decade ago, the United States has not buried the dichotomy between vocational education and academic education. Instead, as shown by the publication of the report, "A Nation at Risk," the academic community is again declaring war on the vocational education establishment. This report, which stresses the need for excellence in education, is in fact a cry for elitism in education. For example, the statistics that show that the great increase in student enrollment in vocational education is viewed by the academic community, at least by those who serve on the national commissions who publish reports, as a "dire warning signal" of the "rising tide of vocationalism," which they codify as "mediocrity." However, the great "need" to "protect" students from vocational education may actually be a need to protect the jobs of the academicians, who suffer from declining enrollments in their courses. The reason for this dichotomy is rooted in the history of American education, for the system originally developed as college education for the few and manual training for others. As the middle class increased, however, the dichotomy between vocational and academic pursuits increased, to the detriment of vocational education. And in many cases, vocational educators have accepted and internalized the designation of inferiority. If American education is to improve, the war between the factions must stop, and all educators must move toward an integrated system that will better serve all students. (KC)

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IN THE NAME OF EXCELLENCE: THE AMBUSH OF
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

M. Feldman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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I have come down here, in part, to eat a little crow. Exactly eleven years ago--to the very day--on December 1, 1973, I stood before this group, then assembled in Atlanta. It was an important year for vocational educators. It was the first year in our history that more than half the work force worked in jobs for which educators had prepared them.

At that meeting, referring to the traditional antagonism between academic and vocational educators, in a clumsy impersonation of Abraham Lincoln, I proclaimed:

The Civil War between educational specialists is over. The need now is for a new unification....We are at last being invited to join as full if not favored partners in an enlarged view of the educational enterprise. But we cannot become a part of this necessary integration if we continue to see ourselves involved in a kind of win/lose struggle with our academically-oriented colleagues.

If I was not entirely wrong, I was mighty premature. That war is not over. The academic educators are on the march again in the same chauvinistic spirit we thought they had outgrown. And we find we must fight all over again a war we thought we had won.

I am going to speak very plainly to you today. As some of you know, I have spent most of my life as a vocational educator. I am an unashamed, unreconstructed, unrepentant partisan of vocational education. And I believe that American vocational education was bushwacked about eighteen months ago. We were the object of a sneak attack--skillfully disguised as a pious plea for excellence in education.

The report was titled--ominously--A Nation at Risk. As show business, it was impeccable--the apocalyptic

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rhetoric warning us of dire consequences if we did not mend our educational ways. We were invited to tremble at the spectre of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in education.

In what is surely one of history's more excessive metaphors, we were told we had "been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." Had it been forced upon us by an unfriendly foreign power, the report said, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war." The bellicose images in the report's very early paragraphs suggest to me that its author, The National Commission on Excellence in Education, had war in mind. The report, rightly understood, was a declaration of war, all right, not on mediocrity--that was a code we in vocational education broke long ago--but on vocational education. And suddenly we are right back where we started from.

A dozen years ago, the Carnegie Commission, after a sustained and searching examination of our educational institutions, criticized the system for offering too many young people too few alternative options. The system, the Commission said, is "too much biased toward academic subjects alone." Now, a few years later, the Excellence Commission calls noisily for fewer options and a re-emphasis on academic subjects at the expense of vocational ones. It is a bold step backward.

These realities have not escaped educational commentators. Fred Hechinger, the "dean" of educational journalists at The New York Times, wrote just a few days ago: "Demands for excellence have pushed concern for equity onto the backburner." He quotes Gregory Anrig, president of the Educational Testing Service: "Excellence cannot be allowed to become the new code word for a retreat from equity just when struggles of recent years are beginning to pay off."

We here are, for the most part, post-secondary vocational educators. Need we be concerned about an attack on secondary vocational education? Perhaps the de-emphasis or abolition of vocational education at the secondary level would work to our advantage, increasing the demand for technical education at the post-secondary level. But this is cold comfort.

It is the idea of vocational education that is under attack. The first assault was simply directed at its most vulnerable flank. But an attack on any part of vocational education is an attack on the whole. Anyone in doubt about that need only read the report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education,

sponsored by the National Institute of Education, titled Involvement in Learning and released in mid-October.

Again using "excellence" as a battle-tested smokescreen, this report, a companion to A Nation at Risk, is the second wave--a frontal assault on vocational education at the post-secondary level. The report is at least candid. Under the subhead "Warning Signals," it does not talk about a "rising tide of mediocrity." It cites evidence of what we might call a "rising tide of vocationalism."

The numbers we present proudly at meetings such as this one, are, to the Study Group, a dire "warning signal." More and more students are majoring in what the Commission is pleased to call "narrow specialties," more than half of them, God help us, "in occupational fields." The proportion of non-occupational degrees awarded in four-year institutions fell from 49% in 1971 to 36% in 1982, a trend we applaud and they abhor.

In community colleges, it was even "worse." The proportion taking non-occupational degrees fell from 57% to 37% in the same period. Think of it. College students are choosing vocationally-centered curricula almost two to one. And this is the national emergency that the Study Group was established to combat. The report states it with perfect clarity: "The college curriculum has become excessively vocational." The mission of the Study Group is to reverse these trends and "to restore liberal education to its central role in undergraduate education."

The war, clearly, is not a limited war on secondary vocational education. It is all-out, total war on all vocational education. And it is working. The Ford Foundation recently announced the first program in its whole history for community colleges. Its purpose: to encourage transfers to academic programs in four-year institutions.

In Texas, in The Spirit of the Excellence report, H. Ross Perot has called for the abolition of vocational education in secondary schools. Perot called vocational education the enemy of excellence. It prepares young people for imaginary jobs; it teaches them to use antique equipment; it teaches skills like grocery sacking, best learned in a few hours on the job; and it costs too much.

This last count of the indictment suggests what is certainly at least a subliminal reason for the efforts to substitute academic for vocational courses. At a time

when public budgets everywhere are reaching or exceeding the limits taxpayers will tolerate, cost-consciousness is ascendant. And academic education, as we all know, costs less. Appeals for its re-emphasis at the expense of costlier vocational offerings is seductive, fiscally speaking.

Nor can it be coincidental that academic educators are calling for more academic courses when enrollments in higher education are declining and enrollments in academic courses are declining most dramatically. We may not be talking about educational policy; we may be talking about bread and butter. It may not be the welfare of students that is at risk, but that of academic educators.

It is time we faced the fact that educational policy formation has become the near perfect monopoly of our academic colleagues, in what amounts to an educational segregation or apartheid as pervasive as racial segregation in South Africa. Do you know that there was not a single vocational educator on the Excellence Commission? Not one. Or on the Study Group on Excellence in Higher Education? Zero.

This great debate about the future of American education is going forward virtually without the participation of representatives of what is fast becoming the dominant mode of education in America. It is not a great debate--it is a great and empty monologue which offers discredited solutions to the easy questions and leaves the hard questions unasked and unanswered.

The problems of American education will never be solved by academic educators alone. They represent part of the solution, but when they presume to provide the whole of it, the result is grotesque.

Policymakers are, for the most part, mature educators who believe everything will be all right if we simply return to the curriculum in which they were educated. They are reactionaries in the literal sense of the word. Listen to the words of the Excellence Commission: "For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents."

This is not the language of scholarship; it is the language of the soap box. And the conclusion the Commission draws is not based on a reasoned analysis of an educational system adjusting to a radically altered set of requirements. It is rather an unreasoned, hysterical

expression of a generational egomania. "The education our generation had is the education this generation should have," they seem to be saying. It makes my heart sink. Here we go again with the arrogant, isolated mentality of "the best and the brightest," dictating policy for a body of students with whom they have had no contact and whose needs they cannot comprehend.

As you know, the Excellence Commission was only one of nine study groups that reported over a period of about eighteen months. They agreed unanimously that our schools are not performing nearly as well as they might. They agreed that we must set higher goals for the schools and that they must be specific. Both of these propositions are beyond dispute.

But the prescriptions for how to bring the performance of the schools up to these goals are disheartening. They consist of literally hundreds of proposed procedural reforms, most of them familiar--longer school days, longer school years, more homework, better discipline, more courses in this, fewer courses in that--and hundreds more. One of the most recent proposals is that guidance counselors use their telephones more freely.

But such ; rely procedural recommendations, which comprise the bulk of the rising tide of studies of education, have disabling limitations. If studies would improve the schools, the schools would be fantastic. (We are approaching the time when our statistics on education are nearly as exhaustive as our statistics on sports.) And if exhortations would improve the schools, the schools would be faultless. We have been formally admonishing the schools to shape up for nearly a century. And if goals alone would improve the schools, they would be fabulous. They have goals in a great and confusing profusion.

I must say I resent the rhetorical excess--the hype--of the Excellence campaign. It will tend--as, I'm afraid, did the over-publicized war on poverty--to concentrate the gathering national concern about education--and then dissipate it in a great pious spasm. This massive, somewhat monolithic, education system is not going to change its ways suddenly. Reform is a task, as Lyndon Johnson once said in another connection, not for sprinters but for long distance runners.

A dozen years ago, when we began to search for an honorable way to get out of Vietnam, Senator Aiken made a temporary, irreverent suggestion, "Let's just say we won the war," he said, "and go home." I'm afraid we may be waging the Looking Glass War against mediocrity in the

same way. Just a year after the Excellence Crusade was launched, with the famous A Nation at Risk report, Secretary Bell produced another report called The Nation Responds. The next day, the President proudly told his weekly radio audience, "We have met the rising tide of mediocrity with a tidal wave of school reforms." But when you look closely at The Nation Responds, you find it is, overwhelmingly, a bulging catalog of good intentions. It is a way of saying we won the war--and going home.

Where, exactly, did the Excellence people go wrong? The Excellence Commission laments that: "over the past two decades parents and students have come to believe that the best insurance in a technological society is a highly specialized education that will lead to a specific job." I have come to believe that myself. But, they write: "no one knows precisely how new technologies will affect the skills and knowledge required by our future labor force." And then comes the familiar, exhausted non-sequitur on which the anti-vocational edifice has stood for nearly a century: "We thus conclude that the best preparation for the future is not narrow training for a specific job, but rather an education that will enable students to adapt to a changing world."

Where is it written that those who have a special skill cannot adapt? Only those who have none can adapt? How do we know that the mastering of one skill does not enhance one's ability to adapt to another? How does one begin to confront the boundless innocence of those who would impose such a smug generalization on the seething reality of the world's labor markets?

The academic partisanship of the Excellence Commission and the Higher Education Study Group blinded them to the central point. As education has become more universal, the need to integrate the educational experience has become more urgent. The Commission, behind its smokescreen, is an appeal for the re-fragmentation of our educational effort.

A dozen years ago, Sidney Marland, as United States Commissioner of Education, conducted an energetic campaign for integration. He found:

Education's most serious failing is its self-induced voluntary fragmentation--the strong tendency of education's several parts to separate from one another, to divide the enterprise against itself.

"A house divided against itself," as Lincoln said, in another connection, "cannot stand."

Many of us have been trying for years to lay aside these old factional distinctions between academic, vocational, and general education, which are crippling our educational effort. They suggest choices which need not be made, divisions in what is really indivisible, and conflicts where none need exist. We should not seek "separate but equal" attention for vocational education. We should seek the full integration of our thought and practice about education.

We have traditionally divided the arts to which we educate people into three separate domains: the practical arts, the liberal arts, and the fine arts. Our liberal educators must abandon the illiberal belief that only a liberal arts education liberates the student. The practical arts and the fine arts liberate students from enslaving limitations in different, but indispensable ways.

The practical arts are the arts of function. Their mastery liberates people from helpless dependence. The liberal arts are the arts of meaning. They give the student a sense of context and continuity. They liberate us from a sense of isolation and futility. The fine arts are the arts of transcendence. They teach that man can create more than he can comprehend. By developing our sense of mystery, they liberate us from what is merely literal.

The American educational tradition originally developed in a way that made these disciplines competitive or--at the very least--that badly blurred their right relationships. Without assaulting you with a lecture in cultural history, let me suggest what has happened, deliberately oversimplifying an enormously complex set of interacting historical circumstances.

Higher education was, originally, frankly elitist. Right up until the American Revolution, Harvard students were listed by social rank. In those days, common people were flatly forbidden to "walk in great boots" or otherwise imitate the behavior of their betters. It was a rigidly hierarchical society. Colleges educated a tiny elite destined for the ministry, for the professions, or for the easy responsibilities of class and privilege. It was, in its essentials, a liberal education. One learned skills in other ways.

But as the Democratic tradition blossomed in the United States as it had blossomed nowhere else in the world before, more and more people aspired to more and

more education. And the model was the kind of liberal arts education intended for a tiny elite--many of whom had no need to earn a living. "Do you smoke?" the great lady asks her daughter's suitor in Oscar Wilde's play. When he admits sheepishly that he does, she says, "Good. I think every young man should have an occupation of some kind."

As America democratized, the mark of membership in the new mass aristocracy became a college education originally intended for the indolent or for the professional scholar. In 1900, 200,000 students went to college. Last year, the number was 8,000,000. In 1892, public high schools enrolled about 500,000 students or 6.7% of the high school age group. By 1980, that enrollment was more than 16 million, 99% of the age group. A vocationally impractical curriculum simply did not suit the real-world imperatives of the masses.

This is not to say that liberal education has no part in the education of working people. I have been haunted by the message of a puzzling, perplexing, heart-rending book called What Went Wrong? by an English craftsman. He is writing about British working people who have achieved all the material ambitions they sought to achieve half a century ago--and who now have no sure sense of purpose. The question has become, "Is there life after work?" or only an emptiness to be filled by passive entertainments, recreational chemicals, and bored indolence.

Clearly, the liberal and fine arts, adapted to the needs of our mass aristocracy, must be integral to our educational objective. Educational reform is not best seen as a zero-sum game in which the interests of academic educators are antagonistic to those of vocational educators, in which the goals of one can only be achieved at the expense of the goals of the other.

The Excellence Commission has done education a great disservice in propagating this false and divisive formulation of the question. Academic and vocational education are not in conflict; each has an importance of its own. They are complementary. It is not a question of either/or; it is a question of both/and. Each serves distinct, different functions which sometimes overlap.

No respectable vocational educator is opposed to academic education. Some of us have become passionate advocates of academic education. It is hard to imagine a Commission on Excellence composed primarily of vocational educators proposing a reduction of academic offerings so that vocational offerings might be expanded. The New Humanities Commission, in the report issued in late

November, described the goal of the Humanities as the transmission of a sense of "a common culture rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage." Otherwise, the Commission says, the graduate "is left to believe without judgement, decide without wisdom, and act without standards." I agree heartily with this statement of goals, and I'll put my graduates against those of any institution in the country in their achievement.

One tragic measure of the extent of the either academic or vocational approach is the rapidly growing number of students who fall between the two and are sentenced to the "general" track in secondary education. During what now seems like a Golden Age of American Education, two clear tracks were open to students. There was an academic track for college-bound students and a vocational track for job-bound students. The "general" track--which led, then and now, to limbo--was small. But the number of students on this general track, this track leading nowhere, has increased from one in eight to nearly one in two. What can we do? I think we have to acknowledge that we have a fight on our hands--a fight that--again--finds us emotionally and practically unprepared. I have been complaining for years that we, as vocational educators, are unsure of our legitimacy. We still lack a systematic rationale. We still have no solid sense of identity and purpose. We still lack a sure sense of our relationship to the other necessary aspects of education. And, as I said a dozen years ago, if we have a coherent vision of an optimum national policy toward vocational education, I would like somebody to tell me what it is.

I think, to some degree, we ourselves have accepted the demeaning characterizations of vocational education--that we are a subordinate, second best to liberal education. We were seen for so long as third-rate remedial factories for academically disabled young people that I wonder if we do not tend to see ourselves that way.

Vocational education has clearly outgrown its original rationale and achieved a new maturity. We need to bring our self-image up to this new reality. We have been inner-directed; we have talked to ourselves and to the growing army of consumers of vocational education. Now we must begin to cultivate a wider audience. We have neglected some important constituencies. We have, perhaps because of a nagging sense of inferiority, neglected the academic community.

We in vocational education have achieved many of the goals we dreamed about in the fifties, but we have grown as a response to inexorable necessities, not because we skillfully persuaded the public to accept the vocational alternative. We need to work on our public image. We need a new rationale, solidly rooted in sound scholarship. We need a new outreach to the nation's thought leaders.

We need to make certain that never ever again will an important national commission be formed without proper and proportionate vocational representation. We must, as a nation and as a profession, stop marching to tunes composed by academic educators. We must make our voice heard; we must insist on equitable representation, and, above all, we must bring to these deliberations a new, larger vision of excellence--of which higher academic standards can only be one part. Specifically, I think we should insist on the prompt formation of a new commission on which both academic and vocational educators are fairly represented to begin to repair the damage.

Such a commission would work out a specific vision of a re-integration of the educational enterprise in ways that would harmonize indispensable vocational and academic goals and provide a solid sense of national direction. Then organizations such as the newly-formed P.A.V.E. (People in America for Vocational Education) could patiently begin the long process of moving toward that vision.

There must be a continuing reformation in American education. There can be no question about that. Clearly, a system fashioned to meet one set of educational requirements for a tiny fraction of the population now needs to meet a new and radically altered set of requirements for virtually the whole population.

Clearly, we need a new definition of excellence--not a warmed-over version of an old one. We need a definition of excellence that will have meaning for everyone. We need a definition of excellence that includes excellent articulation with the known needs of labor markets. We need a definition of excellence that acknowledges both the need for saleable skills and a sense of place and meaning. We need a definition of excellence that provides both the specific and the general and acknowledges that the road between them is a two-way road. We can move both from the general to the specific, and, as vocational educators have been demonstrating for decades, from the specific to the general. We need a definition of excellence which acknowledges that logical-mathematical intelligence is

only one of at least seven types of intelligence, and that all need cultivation.

Above all, we need a definition of excellence that will tend to integrate the educational enterprise and not resume the destructive process of fragmentation.

Thank you.